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HEADLINE: TOUR SATISFIES CORZINE ON DETENTION OF MUSLIMS;
BUT SENATOR SAYS INS MUST SPEED UP CASES

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BODY:

Touring the Passaic County Jail on Friday amid mounting concerns over detention of Muslim immigrants, U.S. Sen. Jon S. Corzine praised improving jail conditions but rapped federal officials for the protracted incarcerations.

The New Jersey Democrat said the Passaic County Sheriff's Department has made some effort to accommodate the religious and legal needs of detainees rounded up after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, about 200 of whom are in the Paterson jail. But he said he was troubled by the open-ended nature of the detentions, which are handled by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service.

"These indefinite lockups don't strike me as consistent with the principles of due process that we practice in this country," Corzine told reporters outside the jail. "I think the INS needs to get on the stick and adjudicate these cases." Karen Kraushaar, an INS spokeswoman in Washington, stressed that all the detainees allegedly broke immigration laws. She said formal charges had been delayed in some cases, but an internal review found the lag reasonable.

"We believe any delays were justified given the situation in the New York area, the need to protect the safety of the American people and the detainees themselves, and the need to protect the continuity of the criminal investigation," Kraushaar said.

Corzine met Sheriff Jerry Speziale and toured the jail for about an hour Friday. He said the visit convinced him that the Sheriff's Department has addressed Muslim community concerns about prayer accommodations as well as access to legal and social services, although the jail has not been able to provide food that conforms to Muslim dietary standards.

"This is not a hotel -- it's not a resort," said Corzine, unwittingly echoing former Sheriff Edwin J. Englehardt's famous warning that the Passaic County Jail is "not a country club." Corzine continued, "But it's clean, and people have the opportunity, within the constraints of being in a jail, to be taken care of well." Sohail Mohammed, a Clifton immigration lawyer representing some

detainees, agreed that conditions have improved and that some problems were being addressed. In November, during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, about a dozen detainees in Paterson and at the Hudson County Jail in Kearney went on a hunger strike to protest the length and conditions of their imprisonment.

"We're not asking for a red carpet and a Marriott Hotel with menu choices, but the basic necessities, such as halal food," Mohammed said, referring to the Muslim dietary standard.

Speziale said it had been impossible for the jail to provide halal food. However, since the jail is considering a privatization of food services, he promised to discuss halal options with prospective vendors.

After recent meetings among Muslim community members, Speziale, Corzine, and U.S. Rep. Bill Pascrell Jr., D-Paterson, the Sheriff's Department has addressed a number of other issues, though, the sheriff said. Copies of the Koran, the Muslim holy book, are to be provided for prayers, as is a suitable gathering place in the jail. Phone numbers for social and legal services in the detainees native languages have also been distributed, Speziale said.

The Passaic County Jail has for many years aggressively sought contracts to house inmates from the state prison system. Englehardt packed the jail well over capacity with the inmates, yielding lucrative state reimbursements.

As state inmate counts dwindled, acting Sheriff Ronald S. Fava last year sought to replace them with federal inmates. After Sept. 11, the jail's count of INS detainees soared from 44 to about 400, as Hudson and Passaic became the chief detention centers in the terrorism investigation.

Speziale said the count now stands at 244 INS detainees, about 70 percent of whom were incarcerated as part of the post-attack dragnet.

Some 80 detainees recently were transferred from Passaic County to Middlesex County, and Speziale said he expects the Paterson population to drop to about 150. While Mohammed, the immigration lawyer, said the transfers had eased excessive crowding, Speziale said he does not believe the jail is overcrowded.

With an official capacity of 839, the Passaic County Jail currently holds about 1,700 inmates altogether. Speziale and his predecessors, however, say it can safely hold many more, and the state Department of Corrections has repeatedly given the jail high marks.

GRAPHIC: PHOTO - WARREN WESTURA / SPECIAL TO THE RECORD - U.S. Sen. Jon S. Corzine after touring the Passaic County Jail on Friday.

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